

SPECIAL SERIES  
Civility Wars

# In These Divided Times, Is Civility Under Siege?

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It's a time of [deepening political divisions](#) in the United States, with people on opposite ends of the political spectrum not only disagreeing but many really disliking the other side. That dislike has been growing for decades.

In the midst of all that division and dislike, there are growing calls for civility. One [poll shows](#) that a majority of Americans say incivility is a major problem. And an [NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll](#) says that the country's civility crisis is deepening and that a majority of Americans fear it will lead to violence.

But what does civility actually mean? It's sometimes defined as simply being polite. It comes from the Latin root *civilis*, meaning "befitting a citizen." It's a term that's a comfort to some and repressive to others. And while, yes, it can refer to politeness, it's much more than that.

"Civility is the baseline of respect that we owe one another in public life," says Keith Bybee, the author of [How Civility Works](#). "And when people talk about a crisis in civility, they usually are reporting their sense that there is not a shared understanding of what that baseline of respect ought to be."

Right now that social contract — a common agreement on what appropriate public behavior looks like and who deserves respect — feels broken. No one can agree on the facts, let alone on how to argue or what to argue about. With a president who uses terms like "loser," "dumb as a rock" and "fat pig" to describe his critics and "animals" to describe undocumented immigrants, it feels like the tone for nasty behavior that's seeping into everyday life is being set in Washington.

Some blame the Democrats, others the media — and many blame President Trump.

For some, this deep sense of division and dislike spells out danger. What's at stake?

"The success of the country," says [Jonathan Haidt](#), a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business. "When we don't trust each other, that means it's very difficult for politicians to compromise. It's very difficult to find win-win solutions or positive-sum games. And so there are so many problems that we could solve," but we don't. "We become credulous, we become easily manipulated by our foreign enemies and our democracy becomes what? A beacon to the world as to what not to do," he says.

The arrival of social media didn't help, Haidt says. He sees it as an accelerant to spew outrage and anger faster and further into the world. It's a tool that has empowered the powerless to topple dictators, but it's also one that is used to manipulate, deceive and, well, be horrible to people online anonymously.

But the United States has survived even more divided times in the past — from the country's founding to the Civil War, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.

Not only did the country endure, but sometimes the outcome of all the so-called incivility was a rewriting of that social contract to make it more inclusive of people who were discounted and dismissed in the past.

Civility has been about making sure that the status quo, the hierarchy of the status quo at the moment, which means racial inequality, gender inequality, class inequality, stays permanent.

"When you have people whose behavior runs squarely smack dab into conflict with some prevailing consensus about what constitutes appropriate conduct, those are the people that are castigated as being insufferably rude," the author Bybee says. "I mean, this was a criticism made of the civil rights movement in the middle of the 20th century when you had these lunch counter sit-ins, which were a way of seeking legislative change."

At the time, those sit-ins were dismissed, he says, as an "affront to racial etiquette." In the late 1800s and early 1900s, women seeking the right to vote were uncivil. Rosa Parks? Uncivil. AIDS activists with ACT UP protesting in dramatic and disruptive ways? Uncivil. Black Lives Matter? Uncivil.

"Civility has been about making sure that the status quo, the hierarchy of the status quo at the moment, which means racial inequality, gender inequality, class inequality, stays permanent," says [Lynn Itagaki](#), an associate professor at the University of Missouri who writes on what she calls civil racism. She defines it as maintaining civility at the expense of racial equality.

It's a fraught term, she says. It carries the echoes of that historical and bigoted definition of the civilized versus the savage.

Maybe this moment feels like a crisis, Itagaki says, but when people call for a restoration of civility, who gets to define it? Who gets to rewrite the social contract?

Right now [hate crimes](#) and [hate groups](#) are on the rise. The Southern Poverty Law Center blames the president for stirring fears about a country that is becoming less white and for sparking an immigration debate with racial overtones.

The calls for civility can feel like an effort to stifle people's outrage over injustice or hate, because civility can be a tool to build or a weapon to silence.

"To what purpose is civility going to be used? Is it going to be more inclusive?" Itagaki asks. "Is it going to mean that you're bringing more people's voices into the political debates, or are you using civility as a way to go back to the old hierarchies and the status quo since the founding of the American republic, where you only had white male propertied free landowners who were able to vote?"

So for some, now is a time to take a step back and be civil to each other. For others, it's imperative to be uncivil in a way that has led to social justice in the past.